

Hospitals take extra care disposing of medical waste

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

You probably don't think much about what a hospital does with its wastes. But it's pretty much the same as what any institution or community does with its garbage — with a few more precautions.

"The expense of waste disposal is going up very rapidly because it is so complex," said Bill Scheuber, Boisford General Hospital's administrator of professional and support services.

First, there is medical waste. That includes things that come in contact with patients, including needles and bandages. There is general waste, like garbage from the cafeteria, for example, that's compacted and sent to a landfill.

Liquid waste, mostly chemicals, is taken away by a licensed hauler. The hospital's small amount of radioactive materials are returned to the vendor, who dispenses of it as regulated by law.

Boisford incinerates, on average, 700 pounds of medical waste weekly and sends an average of 8,700 cubic yards of general waste to the landfill, Scheuber said. And like all other hospitals, the amount of waste continues to increase.

AIDS, have placed a greater demand on incineration because of the need to kill germs and bacteria by burning items at 1800 degrees. More items in a hospital are disposable, including items like thermometers. And all of it comes in packaging, especially plastic, which also is incinerated.

Boisford's incinerator is licensed by the state Department of Natural Resources and certified by the Michigan Department of Health as a producer of medical waste. The hospital spent \$10,000 maintaining the incinerator last year.

"It does meet current regulations," Scheuber said. The hospital has a contract with a company to maintain the incinerator within legal specifications and regulations.

"At this moment we are in compliance with legal regulations. But we fully expect the rules to get tougher," Scheuber said.

Scheuber said he's aware of the public's growing concern over waste, medical or otherwise. That's where education is needed.

"We need to do a good job of communicating with the public," he said. "A lot of this is new and they don't understand it. We need to explain it. If we don't, people will leave it to their own imaginations and come up with their own answers."

Hospitals plan to build own regional incinerator

Continued from Page 1

pital Association Service Corp. to finance a study.

"It showed there was sufficient waste volume to warrant a regional incinerator and that it would be less costly in the long run to have a regional program," said Bob Camis of the Michigan Hospital Association Service Corp., which hopes to build the incinerator.

The hospitals want to build a regional incinerator that can burn 100 tons of waste a day. The 20 participating hospitals burn an estimated total now of 70 tons a day, Camis said.

State Rep. Jan Dolan, R-Farmington Hills, supports a regional incinerator. "I think we're going in the right direction. Hospitals are usually responsible. If they aren't, they have their reputations to lose," said the Boisford board member.

Incineration is the "proven technology" that's environmentally safe, cost efficient and regulated by gov-

ernment. "The air pollution devices (on incinerators) are far superior to anything you would have on your home. I don't think there's been any more concern with them (incinerators) than an apartment building with an incinerator."

With tougher regulations, hospitals have few choices. They can either shut down, or retrofit their facilities to comply. Retrofitting a small incinerator to meet regulations could cost \$350,000, Camis said.

Besides the increasing costs of landfills — at which a lot of waste from hospitals cannot be disposed — the state's goal by the year 2000 is to have 40 percent of all waste converted to energy, Camis said.

In addition to tougher state regulations the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta have come out with guidelines of the type of medical waste that must be incinerated. "More things today are considered infectious," Scheuber said.

CAMIS' GROUP has contacted communities, such as Canton Township and Romulus, to determine the response to building a medical waste incinerator in certain areas.

"We're facing a perception problem," Camis said. "So what we're going through is an educational process. We're educating them to the fact that the process is as safe as anything today."

The proposed regional incinerator would be built on 5-8 acres in an industrial area, not residential where most hospitals are today. "We want to build not just an incinerator but a medical waste program so we can study ways to do environmental packaging," Camis said.

The regional incinerator will burn medical waste from participating hospitals. Gases will be put through a secondary chamber where they will be burned at 2200 degrees. "All gases will be neutralized from that," Camis said. Non-hazardous ash will be sent to a landfill.

Kids chow down

Continued from Page 1

wood.

Teacher Ellis, caught up in the spirit of the day, was wearing a sweater that celebrated Operation Desert Storm. The war in the Persian Gulf has captured the imaginations of her students, she said.

"They have a sense of pride in their country and where they live," said Ellis, a Farmington Hills resident.

"They're very concerned . . . and talking about it," she added. "I've tried to point out that there

are two sides. I had one student who was flying on a vacation. He was a little afraid. I tried to reassure him."

Having a soldier for a pen pal and Army food to eat helps the children come to terms with the conflict, said parent Donna Fabian, Kendall's mother.

"I think it's wonderful," she said. "The kids are getting first-hand information. They're really involved in the whole thing. If there are fears about the war, they talk about it. It really helps."

GATEWOOD HAS said very little in her letters about her Army job, Ellis said. They do know, however, that she's a resident of Baltimore and wants to study business after her Army days.

She has not written since the War started Jan. 16, the teacher said.

The Army meal followed an all-school assembly during which students sang songs like "Wind Beneath My Wings" and "Proud To Be An American," waved American flags and talked about their feelings about the war and the Constitution.

But for Pam Ellis' class, the highlight of the day had to be cold tuna and noodles eaten right from the bag.

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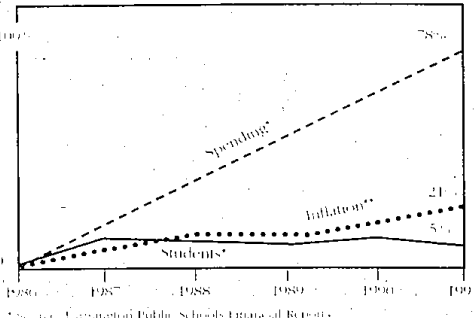
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